2006

REALITIES OF WAR; Far from becoming more peaceful, the world grows more violent -- since WWII each of 10 conflicts has killed more than one million people, and terrorism threatens

REALITIES OF WAR / Far from becoming more peaceful, the world grows more violent -- since WWII each of 10 conflicts has killed more than one million people, and terrorism threatens large-scale death

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Published 4:00 am, Sunday, April 30, 2006

The idea that war is on the wane, a theory advanced in several recent studies, is appealing, but it is also dangerously misleading. Its central argument, made by scholars from the University of Maryland and the Human Security Center in British Columbia, is that since the end of the Cold War more than 15 years ago, nations have tended to fight each other less often, and that civil wars have grown less frequent and less lethal.

[Podcast: John Arquilla gives a grim perspective on wars]

It is good to believe in signs that our essential humanity impels us toward peace. And with the decline in traditional interstate wars and the virtual elimination of colonial wars, there is something to celebrate. But both of these trends were well established several decades ago, and still there is so much war.

In fact, depending on the time period surveyed and the kind of war being analyzed, there may actually be more wars now, but they are being waged differently. Instead of the old struggles between states, or to throw off colonial masters, most fighting today is taking place between rival ethnic groups, as happened in the Balkans in the 1990s, and now in increasingly bloody Iraq. In these conflicts, the goals are often genocidal, from "ethnic cleansing" to extermination.

So a growing awareness of the noble instinct toward peace should not blind us or encourage complacency in the face of continuing, and perhaps growing, instances of cruelty and conflict.

The most significant problem with the idea that conflict as a social phenomenon is in retreat is the inconvenient fact that the overall number of wars today remains much higher than it was half a century ago, or during most of the 1960s and 1970s.

While the last 10 years of the Cold War saw the yearly total of conflicts rise to more than 50, the decline from this temporary spike observed by the University of Maryland and the Human Security Center should not mask the fact that today there are still more than 30 wars under way -- about double the number that were being waged 50 years ago. Viewed from this perspective, war is still a deadly growth industry, and the reduction in war being celebrated now should be seen as simply reflecting a decline from an anomalous few years that featured an unusually high level of conflict.

Another difficulty with the waning-of-war observation has to do with counting the dead. Most studies focus on what they call battle deaths, leaving out those who die from conflict-caused starvation or disease. This omission is deliberate, in part because of the imprecision with which fatalities from hunger and illness can be measured. Nonetheless, in a world in which warring factions increasingly prey upon the innocent, drive them into barren deserts, or herd them into pestilential camps, deaths from these causes must be counted.

Even rough estimates of the number of people suffering and dying would be more than enough to give us a sense of whether war is on the wane. And even the roughest estimates suggest that, for far too many people around the world, the threat of war has grown rather than receded. One need only to reflect on the iconic images of the past decade to know this is true: From mass graves at Srebrenica in the Balkans to the piles of hacked-off limbs in Rwanda, Liberia and Sierra Leone.

And if one were willing to survey an even longer period, say from Waterloo to the war in Iraq, an even more alarming trend would emerge to challenge the notion that there are fewer serious wars now and fewer people being killed.

For example, in all the rest of the 19th century after Waterloo, only two conflicts rose to the catastrophic level of 1 million deaths: China's Taiping Rebellion and Paraguay's suicidal war against Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay. In the first half of the 20th century, only four conflicts rose above the million-death threshold: World Wars I and II and the civil wars in Spain and China.

But during the past 50-plus years, the number of these catastrophic conflicts has skyrocketed to 10, nearly double the combined totals of the two earlier periods in question. This sad modern era began with the Korean War and continued with the starvation of millions in Biafra in the 1960s, the mountains of skulls of Khmer Rouge victims in Cambodia in the 1970s, the brutal Russian campaign in Afghanistan in the 1980s, and on to the most recent cataclysm, the Congo War, which began in 1998, whose death toll reached 4 million.

By taking this longer view, we can see that the pattern in conflict is toward ever greater savagery, with huge percentages of some nations' populations being exterminated -- as happened to Rwanda's Tutsis, almost all of whom were killed in just a few weeks of brutal slaughter in 1994. The Tutsis living there today almost all came from outside the country to drive the genocidal Hutus from power.

The world wars may have seen millions more killed than in these smaller catastrophes, but with the exception of the Soviet Union in World War II, most combatant nations in most wars lost only very tiny percentages of their total populations. However, the roster of more-recent catastrophic conflicts often reflects deaths in far greater proportions. The Khmer Rouge killed at least a third of their country's total population, the Hutus nearly half of theirs. Contrast this with the United States, which lost far less than one percent of its population in World War II.

The major conflicts of great powers have almost always seen them dusting themselves off and going on afterward. As H.G. Wells once put it: "A great nation suffers, but does not die." Twenty years after defeat in World War I, Germany had rebounded, and came close to global conquest. Today, though, we live in a world where failed or failing states can almost literally "die" from catastrophic conflicts. They have little hope of ever recovering from the losses suffered in such wars, at least not for many decades, perhaps not for centuries.

Awareness of this terrible trend over the past half century toward more catastrophic conflicts should foster a sense of urgency in us, displacing the dream that the world has somehow become a nicer, less war-prone place. It is a dream that encourages an irresponsible sense of complacency in the face of growing barbarity.

One other curious problem with recent studies of conflict is that they generally downplay another, more recent, development: the rise of terror as a form of war. The basic point these studies make is that, during the past 30 years, terrorists have killed only an average of 1,000 people per year.

What this observation misses is the huge social, psychological and economic consequences of the increase in the number of significant terrorist acts. And multiply they have, from just over three dozen lethal attacks in 2001 to more than 3,000 in 2004, according to official U.S. government statistics.

Terror may so far be causing less loss of life than other forms of conflict, but it is hugely costly to counter. We have spent more than a trillion dollars since the Sept. 11 attacks, and yet feel no safer, given that so many of our foes -- from bin Laden and al-Zawahiri to al-Zarqawi -- are still on the loose.

So, instead of war being on the wane, we are really facing two terrible dilemmas: An increase in the number of small countries being brutally dismantled in their wars, and the rise of terror as a form of war in its own right. War and terrorism are probably worsening as

a result of two other trends: the growing destructive power of small groups (e.g., Sept. 11) and the near-quadrupling of the number of nations from 50 to 191 since the United Nations was founded more than 60 years ago. Many of them were born fighting because the old colonial powers who freed them showed little concern about lumping together deeply antagonistic ethnic and tribal groups.

Terror networks and civil wars are just the logical outcomes of these trends.

Of the two dilemmas, terror is much harder to come to grips with, as we live in times when even small groups of zealots can ride the rails of our advanced technology to cause enormous, costly disruptions.

But where dealing with terror indeed seems to require what the Pentagon calls a "Long War" mentality, catastrophic "big-kill" wars can and should be dealt with far more expeditiously. In Darfur, for example, where more than a quarter of a million innocents have already died, a thimbleful of military force -- perhaps as small as the few hundred American commandos who toppled the Taliban in late 2001 -- could immediately end the depredations of the savage Sudanese Janjaweed bandits and militias.

The use of force against such murderers should be the rule, not the exception, as virtually every genocide out there could be nipped in the bud with a modicum of military action. How much more in line with our stated values of "life and liberty" this would be. And how much more it would give real meaning to the notion of pursuing a "pre-emptive" strategy to thwart such crimes against humanity.

Besides, we are signatories to the Genocide Convention of 1948. Long ago we legally obligated ourselves to use force when necessary to rescue those at risk of being massacred.

Right now, these concerns are being masked by the current spate of cheery analyses that point to things getting better. But the slight reduction in the number of conflicts such studies highlight only documents the decline from an anomalous end-of-the-Cold-War spike in wars caused by rebellions and revolutions in former-Soviet satrapies like Moldova, Abkhazia and Chechnya.

By looking deeper into the data, though, we can see that conflict in the service of genocide and terror is steadily becoming far more serious. And for decades, war has been getting ever deadlier for those societies least able to cope with it.

We mustn't be lulled into complacency or numbed into an "analysis paralysis" that has been unwittingly fostered by this current crop of conflict studies.

When he first came into office, George W. Bush showed a clear preference for acting to stop genocide. After he was briefed in some detail on how the debacle in Rwanda happened in 1994, and why the United States did nothing to stop it, his response was, "Not on my watch." Well, the sad news is that the Congo War became a catastrophic conflict and genocide began to unfold in Darfur on this president's watch -- while he was adding two wars of his own (in Afghanistan and Iraq) to the list of those already under way around the world.

Perhaps now would be a good time to acquaint him, and all Americans, with this alternative view of the data about current wars. I have to believe that, once the situation is more clearly perceived, no American will be content to allow fiddling with statistics while the world burns.

Catastrophic conflicts

Wars with 1 million or more deaths:

1850 to 1899

Taiping Rebellion (China), 1851-1864 (20-plus million)

War in La Plata (South America), 1864-1870 (1 million)

1900 to 1949

World War I, 1914-1918 (10 million)

China Civil War, 1927-1936 (1.3 million)

Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939 (1-plus million)

World War II, 1939-1945 (40-plus million)

1950-present

Korean War, 1950-1953 (3 million)

Sudan, 1955-present (2.2 million)

Ethiopia, 1962-1991 (1.5 million)

Biafran War, 1967-1970 (2 million)

Vietnam War, 1965-1975 (2 million)

Cambodia, 1975-1978 (2 million)

Mozambique, 1976-1992 (1 million)

Afghanistan, 1979-present (1.75 million)

Rwanda, 1994-present (1.1 million)

Congo War, 1998-2005 (4 million)

Sources: Dan Smith, The State of War and Peace Atlas; Lewis Richardson, Statistics of Deadly Quarrels. All figures are estimates